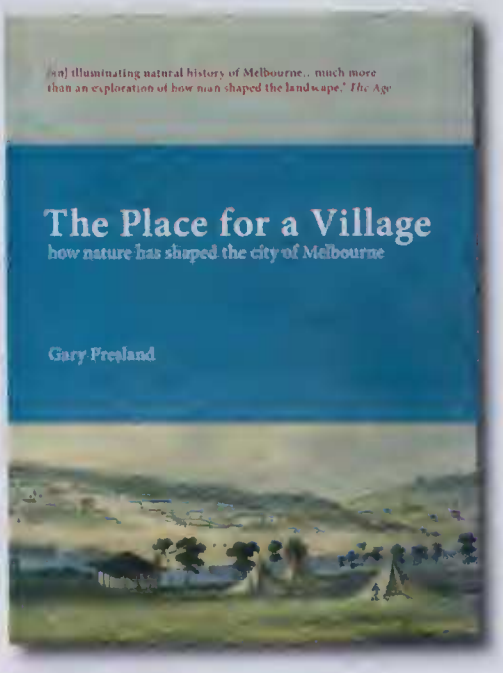
The Place for a Village: how nature has shaped the city of Melbourne

by Gary Presland

Publisher: *Museum Victoria, Melbourne, 2009. 2nd edn, 265 pages, paperback, colour illustrations. ISBN 9780980619027 RRP $39.95*



Gary Presland's book aims to reconstruct the natural history of the Melbourne area as it was at the time of the arrival of the first Europeans. From those lost landscapes and ecosystems it should be possible to deduce how the physical development of Melbourne and its suburbs was influenced. It should also allow an interpretation of aboriginal life at the time.

The thesis of the book can be seen as a series of equations: underlying geology leads to topography and soils; topography plus climate influences hydrology; topography (including aspect) plus soils and climate influence vegetation; vegetation (as food and shelter) plus climate (seasonality) determines the fauna. This ecological model is further complicated by climate gradients and feedback loops such as that of plants and animals affecting the formation of soils.

Melbourne's landscape contains four physiographic units: the Nillumbik terrain of Silurian sediments, volcanic flows, Tertiary sandstones, and Quaternary alluvial deposits. Geological processes working on these formations give rise to the topography as we know it. The Dandenong ranges are outside of the study area but have a strong influence on climate and waterways. The geological features of the ledge of basalt which separated fresh water from salt near where Queens Street crosses the Yarra, and the basalt plains to the west of the city with their luxuriant cover of native grasses, were instrumental in attracting European settlement to the site. Soil types and aspect have driven the way the city has spread.

While wind, rainfall, humidity and barometric pressure were recorded from the earliest times, the science of meteorology only arrived with George Neumayer in 1857. There is a strong rainfall gradient across Melbourne, almost doubling from the basalt plains in the west to the higher country in the east, and it is rainfall that has had the greatest influence on Melbourne's shape.

Chapter 3 gives a masterly reconstruction of streams and wetlands, tracing their routes which now may be in underground drains or diverted. Major alterations, particularly for the Yarra, are documented.

The original vegetation is reconstructed from historical information, remnant vegetation on-site, and regional vegetation associations. Extensive use is made of the Ecological Vegetation Class nomenclature. Original plant communities are deduced for the major topographic terrains: Silurian sediments, Tertiary sands, Basalt plains, Quaternary alluvium, wetlands and

coastal areas. Plant lists for some of these are given in appendices.

Finally, in Chapter 5, all of the components are brought together to describe the animal life with examples of mammals, birds, fishes, reptiles, amphibians, insects and spiders.

Now we have a reconstruction of the natural history of early Melbourne based on its abiotic and biotic ecological components and their myriad interactions. Part 2 uses this background to examine seven topics including the lifestyle of the aboriginal people, why the city is located where it is, modification of our rivers, and the way the shape of Melbourne has evolved.

So that is the thrust of the book. It is well produced with numerous relevant coloured plates of maps, scenes, vegetation and animals. It was awarded the Community History Award for 2009, an accolade well deserved.

A couple of small criticisms: I would have found the large numbers easier to read if they had not lost their commas, and faint captions to pictures and quotations were almost illegible to my eyes. Typographical errors were present, but pleasingly few. I am a little suspicious of the record of Brush Turkey *Alectra lathami* for the Merri Creek.

Buy or borrow a copy for its methodology and its conclusions; it is a valuable contribution to the sense of place for those living in Melbourne.

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Invisible connections: why migrating shorebirds need the Yellow Sea

by J van de Kam (Photographs), P Battley, B McCaffery, D Rogers, J-S Hong, N Moores, J Yung-Ki, J Lewis and T Piersma

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This book has been inspired by the awesome feat of shorebird migration, and by a deepening concern over the loss of key migratory stopover sites. It is the product of a passionate group of world renowned scientists and a world renowned photographer, who have dedicated large portions of their professional lives to documenting the wonder and demise of the Yellow Sea, perhaps the most important link in the migratory pathway used by shorebirds, known as the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. This book represents a major achievement in diplomacy and collaboration (forewords from Australia, China and South Korea), and seems clearly targeted at the general public, presumably to inspire, educate and empower. Key among the threats to shorebird sites in the Yellow Sea is reclamation, an ancient practice which has reached an incredible and worrying scale, and which threatens a number of species and populations of migratory shorebirds. The authors warn us that time is running out to save migratory shorebirds using the Yellow Sea, and they describe the gradual raising of awareness among the peoples of the Flyway to the story of migration and the value of the 'invisible connections' they provide.

Eight chapters describe the life history of migratory shorebirds, the habitats they use, the need for conservation action and some of the initiatives that have been invoked to help save these birds. The content is as international as the birds it describes, ranging from the arid coasts of Australia to the arctic tundras. Books such as this, written by a group of concerned scientists and conservationists, could fall into the trap of zealous advocacy in which the truth is melded to serve the desired outcome; however, the authors have kept it on solid scientific ground. Cutting edge research is presented and contextualised in a reader-friendly manner that is highly accessible to the average reader. It is